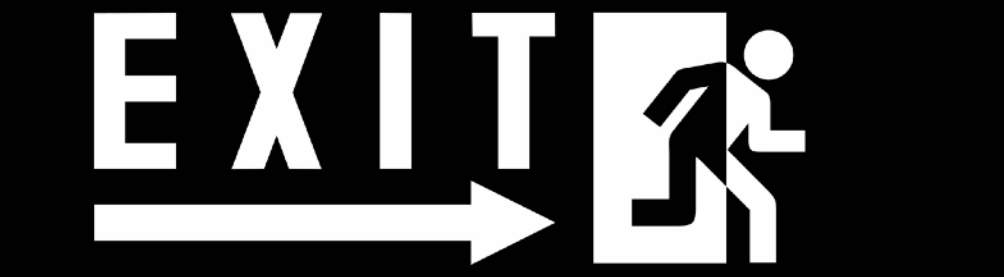

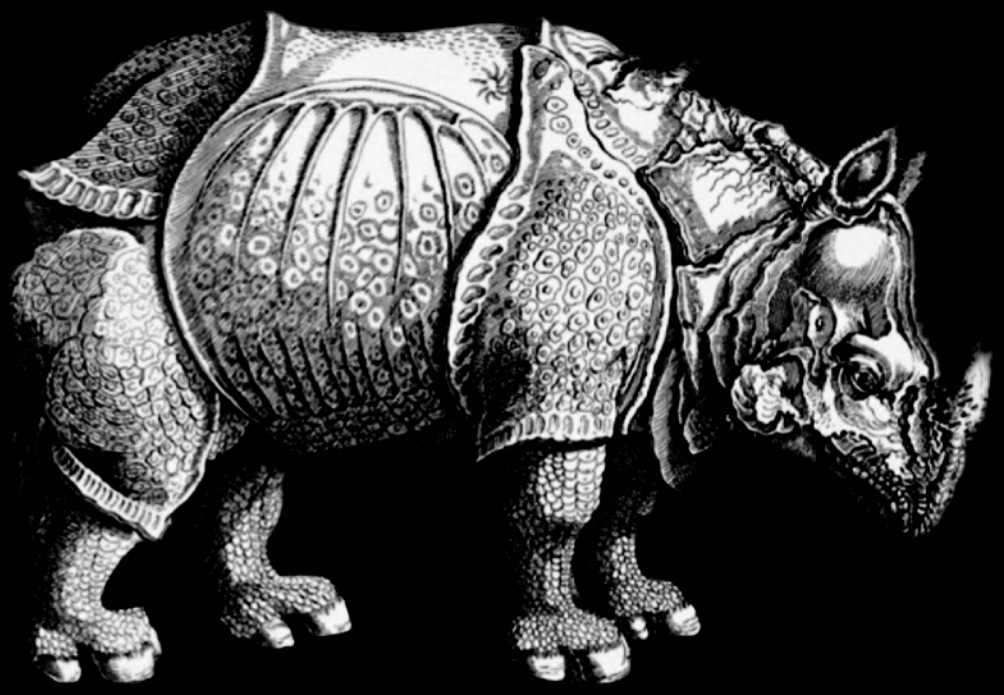

THE RHINO

SUM BUNNY

EXIT THE RHINO

Axiology, Power, Art, and the Optical Politics of Space

BY SUM BUNNY

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We do not inherit a finished city.
We inherit wet paint.

ARK HIVE PRESS

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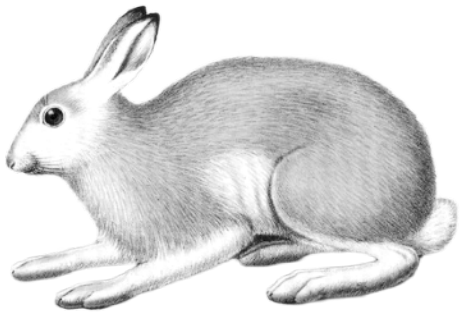


EXIT THE RHINO

Axiology, Power, Art, and the Optical Politics of Space

PROLOGUE: THE FIRST RHINOCEROS

Before museums, there were walls.
Before galleries, caves.
Before critics, hands stained with pigment.
Approximately thirty-six thousand years ago, people entered what is now called Chauvet Cave carrying light. Among the animals they drew were woolly rhinoceroses: horn, shoulder, weight, motion, translated into charcoal and stone.

We do not know who was permitted to enter, who was permitted to draw, or what rules governed the deepest chambers. The cave should not be romanticized as a democratic commons. The first walls may already have had gates.

That uncertainty strengthens the question. A mark never enters a social world without conditions. Someone approaches a surface. Someone has access. Someone leaves an image that others may revisit, preserve, alter, fear, or forget.

The wall remembers.
It also selects.
Thousands of years later, another rhinoceros charged across a stage. In Eugène Ionesco's play, the animal is no longer a creature under observation. It is a political transformation made contagious: neighbors, colleagues, and intellectuals surrendering themselves to the herd until monstrosity feels normal.

One rhinoceros asks us to look.
The other asks whether we still can.
This essay begins between them. It asks how societies arrange appearance: what may occupy a wall, a gallery, a skyline, an archive, or a feed; what is enlarged; what is buried; what must ask permission; and what appears first and negotiates permission afterward.

Graffiti is the central case, but not because every tag is noble or every writer free. Graffiti matters because people across generations collectively maintain an evolving visual language that no individual controls.

Before judging a mark, we will ask a prior question:

How did this become visible?

I. WHO MAY APPEAR?

Stand at a busy intersection. A corporation speaks forty feet high. A bronze figure occupies the plaza. A missing-person flyer curls around a pole. A handstyle survives beneath the billboard until a roller passes over it.

None arrived by the same route.

Axiology asks what is valuable. Optical politics asks what becomes available to value in the first place. Before something can be judged, it must enter attention. Attention is limited. Access to it is not evenly distributed.

A city therefore allocates more than land. It allocates scale, duration, repetition, sightline, and permission. Ownership of a wall includes a degree of control over what thousands of other people will repeatedly encounter.

This does not require a hidden committee. Markets purchase repetition. Governments authorize monuments. Schools preserve some histories. Habit turns familiar arrangements into background. Power may be intentional, inherited, or produced by systems whose effects exceed any single decision.

Visibility is not automatically freedom. Being seen is not the same as appearing as an agent. A person may be highly visible as a suspect and nearly invisible as a neighbor. Surveillance magnifies without granting speech. The right to appear must therefore include the right to refuse exposure, to use an alias, to keep a face out of the frame, and to be forgotten.

The goal is not maximum light. Floodlights also belong to power.

Who may speak at architectural scale?
Who may answer?
Who may hide?
Who can erase?
Who can contest the erasure?
These questions describe the optical politics of space. They do not tell us which image is true. They tell us where truth is being asked to operate on a field arranged in advance.

II. THE DISTRIBUTED WALL

Graffiti is rebellion.
Graffiti is vandalism.
Graffiti is liberation.
Graffiti is threat.
Graffiti is memorial, advertisement, nuisance, beauty, territory, crime, and art.
It remains capable of being all of these. The mistake is believing that one label explains the phenomenon.

The stranger fact is that no one owns the language.

Writers inherit alphabets, handstyles, throws, fills, crowns, arrows, characters, codes of placement, and histories of rivalry. They copy, distort, answer, cover, honor, mock, and mutate.

Regional dialects emerge. Techniques cross borders. A flourish survives its originator and appears years later in the hand of someone who never knew the first writer's name.

This is not a secret committee and not necessarily a conscious global collaboration. It is distributed authorship: many local acts producing a symbolic system no participant can command.

Language and folk music work this way. Shared forms persist through repetition, variation, correction, and memory. No single speaker owns the grammar. No singer controls the tradition.

Decentralized does not mean harmonious.

Graffiti cultures can be generous and cruel. They can welcome newcomers or enforce rank through humiliation, territory, and violence. Informal gatekeeping may be harsher than any grant panel. A wall outside formal power is not outside power.

This complication does not weaken the central observation. It makes it credible. Graffiti is not important because it is pure. It is important because it shows how coherent culture can arise through conflict, imitation, memory, and revision without a central author.

Individual marks disappear. The language continues.

III. GATES

Every culture selects. A museum cannot hang everything. A library cannot preserve every page. A city cannot maintain every structure or leave every surface untouched.

The existence of a gate is not proof of corruption. Without selection, fragile work disappears. The danger begins when selection disguises itself as inevitability.

Every exhibition is also an omission. Every collection casts a shadow. A curator may rescue a work from oblivion; the same institution may fail to recognize another because its methods, class, community, or materials do not resemble what the gate already knows how to admit.

The useful question is not gate or no gate. There is no gate-free culture.

Can the rule be identified?
Can the decision be challenged?
Can an unfamiliar form enter?
Can a refusal be explained?
Can the gate learn?
Graffiti crosses differently. A commissioned mural passes through permission before appearance. A tag reverses the order: appearance first, judgment afterward. Neither sequence guarantees beauty, justice, or truth.

One preserves. One interrupts.

The best institutions do both: they care for inheritance while remaining porous to surprise. The best street cultures also do both: they sustain memory while allowing the language to change.

A gate fails when it forgets that passage is the point.

Digital space changes the mechanism but not the scarcity. A physical wall is zero-sum: new paint can cover old paint. The internet can store nearly endless marks, yet attention remains finite. Online, erasure often looks less like painting over than ranking down. The image still exists. Almost no one is shown it.

A buried signal and an erased signal are not identical. To the public imagination, however, both can become difficult to distinguish from absence.

IV. THE RHINOCEROS RETURNS

Ionesco's rhinoceros should retain its weight. The play is not a loose synonym for bad taste or ordinary agreement. It was shaped by the spectacle of ideological conversion and the advance of fascism: the moment when people do not merely repeat a position but surrender the faculties by which they might inspect it.

A rhinoceros is not anyone who joins a group.

The danger begins when belonging becomes proof.

A strange event occurs once and shocks the town. It occurs again and demands explanation. Then it acquires defenders, jargon, etiquette, nostalgia. The stampede becomes weather.

Repetition does not make a claim true. It can make the claim feel like the only thing that was ever sayable.

A repeated advertisement is not fascism. A curated museum is not a totalitarian state. A personalized feed is not Ionesco's herd. The comparison must not collapse differences of scale and violence. The narrower resemblance is perceptual: repeated arrangements can acquire the authority of nature.

This is why the individual gesture is not the whole story. We may ask what one writer intended, what one curator chose, what one viewer believed. Ionesco asks the atmospheric question:

What is the room becoming?

Exit the rhinoceros does not mean distrust consensus. Expertise can be real. Institutions can correct individual error. Other people may recognize our mistake before we do.

Nor does it mean worship the outsider. Marginality is not evidence of truth.

It means preserve enough independence to inspect the herd without treating independence as proof of correctness.

V. ONE BLOCK, SLOWLY

Walk slower.
That is the method.
At the corner, a mural covers the side of a grocery store. Its colors are intact because the owner, the artist, and the neighborhood negotiated for them to remain.

Below it, a flyer asks for help finding a missing person. Clear tape clouds at the edges. The paper has no preservation plan. Its urgency is its permit.

On the utility box, a sticker advertises a band that broke up three years ago. The sticker has outlived the group.

Then the buffed rectangle.

The city has rolled a patch of gray over a tag. The gray almost matches the wall, which means it does not match at all. The roller's reach determines the border. Drips harden below it. A bright, accidental monochrome now announces both the prohibited mark and the labor of removal.

The buff is not neutral. It is also not necessarily sinister. It may be maintenance, aesthetic control, property enforcement, neighborhood care, or all four at once. What matters is that erasure has acquired a shape.

Absence is not empty.
It has edges.
It has a color.
Someone applied it.
Across the street, scaffolding climbs an old building. A construction fence carries a legal advertisement for the luxury development to come. Someone has written a name across the smiling rendering.

Now the block looks different. The mural, flyer, sticker, buff, scaffold, advertisement, and tag are not equivalent. They carry different risks, resources, intentions, and consequences.

But none is simply there.

Each arrived through a route. Each survives on a timescale. Each asks something of public attention.

After one block, the city has not been solved. Something more useful has happened: the visible arrangement no longer feels inevitable.

VI. WET PAINT

The city is always under construction.

Cranes cross the skyline.
Sidewalks vanish behind plywood.
Fresh concrete hardens beside buildings already marked for demolition.
A wheatpaste peels while another appears beside it.
Every finished city is a construction site viewed from too far away.

Street art belongs to this condition. It is rarely allowed the fiction of completion. Sunlight edits the mural. Weather lifts the poster. Another writer answers. A property owner paints. A neighborhood changes. The work continues after the artist stops.

At dawn, a crew buffs a tag laid down at midnight. Across town, conservators lift grime from a bronze monument so it can continue to appear unchanged. Both are acts of maintenance. One shortens a mark's life. The other extends it.

Institutions are unfinished too, although they often hide the seams. Museums renovate. Archives revise descriptions. Concrete cracks. Bronze corrodes.

One difference between interruption and institution is timescale—and who has the power to manage it.

A perfectly finished city would also be a silent city: every wall assigned, every monument interpreted, every route settled. Order would have won by ending the conversation.

Change is not automatically good. Construction can displace a community. Development can erase a neighborhood. A new tag can bury a memorial. Preservation can harden into nostalgia.

Living culture does not choose between change and memory. It negotiates them.

This may be art's quiet responsibility: not to dictate value, but to interrupt automatic seeing. Good art slows the eye long enough for judgment to wake up.

The interruption cannot last forever. The radical mural becomes a landmark. The scandal enters the syllabus. The unfamiliar style becomes a market category.

No image can preserve surprise indefinitely.

The task is not to keep one work forever new. It is to keep culture capable of being surprised.

VII. EXIT THE RHINOCEROS

Walk home.
Look at the walls.
Some marks arrived with permission. Some arrived without it. Some survived because they were protected. Some survived because everyone forgot to erase them.

The first rhinoceroses endured through intention, darkness, geology, and accident. The modern city remembers in the same mixed way.

We inherit monuments.
We inherit buffed rectangles.
We inherit museum walls and construction fences.
We inherit languages no one owns.
We inherit conversations already underway.
Then we add another layer.

Sometimes with paint.
Sometimes with brick.
Sometimes with a vote.
Sometimes with a label.
Sometimes with a poem.
Sometimes by refusing to look away.
Sometimes by refusing to expose another person to the light.
No one authors the whole city. No curator hangs every picture. No writer controls the language. No generation receives the final draft.

The question is not whether our mark is authorized or rebellious. Those facts matter, but they do not settle its value.

Ask what the mark allows others to notice.

Ask what it hides.

Ask whether it leaves room for reply.

The wall is not finished.
The city is not finished.
We are not finished.

Exit the rhinoceros.

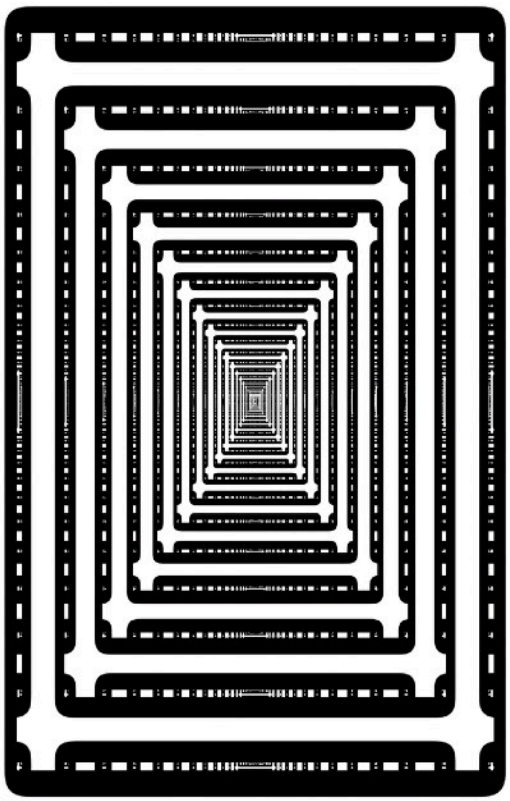
Walk slowly.

A NOTE ON THE SYNTHETIC

The human provided the direction, the argument, and the Rabbit. AI assisted with drafting, adversarial review, and revision. The mirrors remain under inspection.

Acknowledgment

Josiane! Like an absent-minded prof, I forgot to thank you in ENTER THE RABBIT at the IA launch,
so I'm loving you 2X here.
Sum Bunny Loves You!
Sum Bunny Loves You!



FREE FLASH